

# Connecticut Early Childhood Partners Strategic Plan

## Executive Summary

May 13, 2005<sup>i</sup>

The **Early Childhood Partners** process brought together eight State agencies and statewide institutions, with extensive input from numerous community interests over 14 months, to create an outcome-driven **Strategic Plan** to support all Connecticut families to ensure that their children arrive at school healthy and ready to succeed.

The Early Childhood Partners (ECP) share the following **vision**:

**All young children in every family shall attain optimal health and school readiness by age five.**

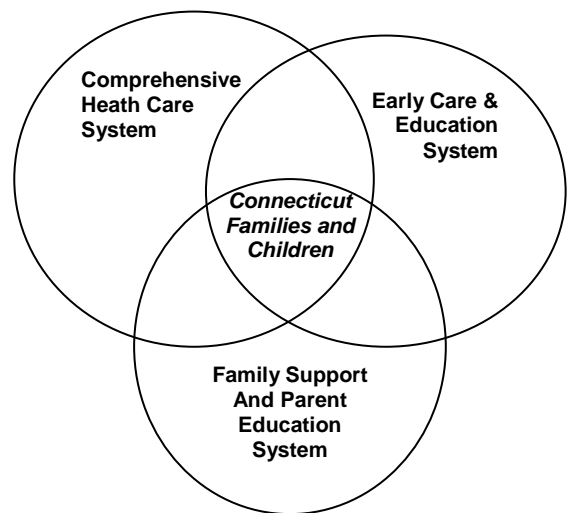
The **mission** of ECP is:

**To build and sustain a comprehensive, integrated system of early childhood and family services that optimizes the health and learning of children birth to age five.**

To accomplish this ambitious mission, the **Early Childhood Partners** have identified specific strategies based on the best thinking and latest research in the field to achieve what the National Governors Association refers to as “a ready State, ready communities, ready schools, ready families, and ready children.” This Plan builds on a rich array of current early childhood initiatives and services that will be drawn into a comprehensive early childhood service system (Figure ES-1).

This work has been supported by the Maternal and Child Health Bureau of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services working through the Connecticut Department of Public Health Bureau of Community Health, Family Health Division.<sup>ii</sup> The Plan will provide the technical blueprint for the Connecticut Early Childhood Cabinet that is currently pending before the legislature or which could be created through Executive Order.

**Figure ES-1. Family-centered Comprehensive Early Childhood Service System**



## The Plan

The Plan aims to create an integrated service system that incorporates comprehensive health services, early care and education, and family support and parent education to ensure the sound health and full development of all children. The system would provide for easy entry, clear navigation, and appropriate supports for all families.

The Plan includes six goals.<sup>iii</sup> The first three goals focus on the services that the integrated system will provide for children and families.

- Goal 1. Every child, adolescent and pregnant woman in Connecticut will have access to comprehensive, preventive, continuous healthcare through a family-centered Medical Home.**
- Goal 2. All children will have access to affordable, quality early care and education programs and an effective transition to Kindergarten.**
- Goal 3. All parents will have access to the support and resources they need to raise healthy children.**

**Bridging Strategies.** To accomplish the first three goals, the Early Childhood Partners have identified a number of key “bridging strategies” that span traditional agency boundaries and will enhance the quality and integration of services. These strategies, which are described in more detail in the body of the plan, include:

- **Create unified standards and common elements for family support**, based on best practices, that every state agency will use as a guideline in its activities related to family support services and programs.
- **Implement a multidisciplinary early childhood consultation model** to improve the capacity of early care and education providers to identify and address the diverse needs of children and their families and to integrate best practices into their respective service models and curricula.
- **Support and expand the single point of access provided by 211/Child Development Infoline** to better enable parents of young children to obtain information, services, and supports.
- **Create a coordinated system of screening, referral, and intake for families** across multiple service providers that identifies family strengths and needs.
- **Expand the medical home concept** across all health systems to create a holistic approach to delivering health care by addressing physical, behavioral/emotional, oral health and developmental health needs, with a priority focus on children with special, complex health care needs.

These integrative strategies will (1) include mechanisms for collaborative problem-solving with a focus on families, e.g. case conferencing, consultation, on-site family/child experts; (2) reflect a commitment to serving currently underserved and unserved populations; and (3) provide for follow-up to monitor transitions through to the resolution of any problem.

The other three goals of the Plan relate to the creation of a local and statewide infrastructure that will serve as the underpinnings for the integrated service system.

- Goal 4. Build the capacity for planning, resource allocation and monitoring of the early childhood services system through a collaborative local or regional early childhood structure for all Connecticut towns.**
- Goal 5: Create a state level infrastructure to guide, support, and monitor implementation of the Early Childhood Partners plan.**
- Goal 6. Promote public education and public will through a broad communication and engagement strategy.**

**Local Infrastructure.** The Plan will encourage and support providers and other key stakeholders to launch new or expanded public-private partnerships at the community level to integrate improved services and make expanded birth to five investments. These early childhood collaboratives, building on the work of School Readiness Councils, local health departments, and local partnerships established with philanthropic support, will work with the State partner agencies to create a service delivery system that is focused on child outcomes, supportive and respectful of the family unit, and accessible to all through multiple points of entry.<sup>iv</sup> Financial and technical assistance will be provided to ensure communities have the capacity and knowledge base to perform child- and family-level needs assessments and have access to a system for tracking progress and measuring outcomes.

**State-Level Infrastructure.** The Plan envisions the creation of an Early Childhood Cabinet to support state-level strategic planning, service integration, and outcomes measurement. The Cabinet will include the Commissioners of the departments with primary responsibility over early childhood services, including Social Services, Children and Families, Public Health, Education, and Mental Retardation, and the Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services (Office of Prevention), and the Secretary of the Office of Policy and Management, as well as community representatives. The Cabinet will be advised by a Policy and Research Council of key early childhood stakeholders, including business, philanthropy and higher education, who will share the latest findings from the field as part of the continuous refinement of the State's early childhood strategies.

The Cabinet will seek cross-agency policy and regulatory improvements, more integrated fiscal planning and expenditure, more robust performance outcomes, and better strategic planning – all in the service of the Plan's goals. The new entity will advance development of the state-level infrastructure required to support this work, encompassing the data management, sustainable financing, and public engagement crucial to effective Plan implementation. It will also allow the State to better evaluate and more equitably fund diverse early childhood programs and systems.

## **Implementation**

The Early Childhood Partners are committed to building on the many collaborative efforts in recent years to develop specific work plans and interdepartmental agreements to advance this Plan. Implementation will be driven by the new Early Childhood Cabinet with critical ongoing support from the federal Early Childhood Systems reform initiative through DPH. This state-level structure will be closely connected to and supportive of local and regional collaboratives that will drive improvements in integrated service delivery on the ground in communities. An inclusive process that engages the statewide early childhood community, local communities, and parents will help ensure continual refinement of the Plan.

The key features of the Plan that will help these evolving state and local structures to drive system improvement include:

- Specific service delivery strategies and policy prescriptions grounded in evidence-based practices;
- Emphasis on building data capacity for accountability and evaluation; and
- Technical assistance, professional development, and cross-training to build capacity across providers and communities.

The future of Connecticut's children is in our hands; full health and school readiness for all children should not be a matter of chance.

## **Summary of Plan Goals and Objectives**

### **Comprehensive Health**

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**Goal 1. Every child, adolescent and pregnant woman in Connecticut will have access to comprehensive, preventive, continuous health care.**

- Obj 1.1 Screen all children for special health care and oral health needs, including developmental delays, disabilities, and emotional/ behavioral concerns, provide for appropriate assessments, and make appropriate referrals.
- Obj 1.2 Build on the screening, consultation and referral resources based in Child Development Infoline, ensuring strong connections to local providers and care coordination when needed.
- Obj 1.3 Expand the number of pediatric and dental practices and clinics providing medical and dental homes.
- Obj 1.4 Implement and expand programs and services for improving birth outcomes and early parenting experiences.
- Obj 1.5 Expand the number of children with access to primary health care.
- Obj 1.6 Build the capacity of the KidCare systems of care and the mental health provider network to address early childhood mental health needs through assessment, consultation, and treatment.
- Obj 1.7 Increase the percentage of children with special health care needs who receive family-centered, coordinated care through community-based health care systems.

### **Early Care and Education**

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**Goal 2. All children will have access to affordable, quality early care and education programs that support an effective transition to Kindergarten.**

- Obj 2.1 Ensure universal access to quality preschool for children ages three and four in communities where children are achieving at lower rates.
- Obj 2.2 Increase the quality and supply of infant/toddler care.
- Obj 2.3 Increase the quality and supply of licensed family child care.
- Obj 2.4 Increase the skills of Kith and Kin caregivers to enhance children's development.
- Obj 2.5 Ensure that low- and moderate-income families have access to child care subsidies to offset the costs of quality early care and education.
- Obj 2.6 Ensure access to child care for children with special needs.
- Obj 2.7 Meet the developmental needs of children through access to comprehensive health, mental health, and educational consultation.
- Obj 2.8 Increase credentials and qualifications for early childhood teachers to enhance the cognitive development of young children.
- Obj 2.9 Ensure effective transitions from preschool to Kindergarten through application of the preschool curriculum and assessment frameworks.

- Obj. 2.10 Improve the capacity of home-based services to provide holistic early care and education experiences to hard-to-reach populations.

### **Family Support and Parenting Education**

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#### **Goal 3. All parents have access to the support and resources they need to raise healthy children.**

- Obj 3.1 Facilitate access to state entitlements, education, training, and employment to promote self-sufficiency among low-income families.
- Obj 3.2 Provide universally available, culturally competent parent education and support.
- Obj 3.3 Create a system to integrate existing family resource and support centers and expand their capacity to serve additional families.
- Obj 3.4 Enhance the capability of early care and education providers to offer family support and parenting education.

### **Local Collaboration**

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To achieve these ambitious goals for our children and families, Connecticut communities of providers, families, and community institutions will need to work together and with the State Government in new ways. Across the state, communities are demonstrating new collaborative processes based both on local leadership, technical assistance from statewide partners, and examination of effective models in other towns and states.

#### **Goal 4. Build the capacity for planning, resource allocation and monitoring of the early childhood services system through a collaborative local or regional early childhood structure for all Connecticut towns.**

- Obj 4.1 Develop an effective process, guidelines, and resources to support development of local early childhood collaboratives to provide governance and accountability for system performance.
- Obj 4.2 Empower parents and other consumers to serve effectively on local collaboratives.

### **State-Level Infrastructure**

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The State of Connecticut will need to organize itself around the needs of families and children in order to cross the various agencies, programs and funding streams. This will require the development of new structures as well as new capacities and processes to collect good information on the state of children, plan effectively, develop new financing streams and mechanisms to align with the integrated service delivery system, and build the support for this bold new direction.

#### **Goal 5: Create a state level infrastructure to guide, support, and monitor implementation of the Early Childhood Partners plan.**

- Obj 5.1 Establish state level accountability structure and governing body that will provide statewide leadership and direction for the comprehensive early childhood system to advance early childhood plan.
- Obj 5.2 Establish an Early Childhood Research and Policy Network / Council in partnership with the state-level governance structure and higher education, the early childhood advocacy and provider community, philanthropy, and business community.

- Obj 5.3 Develop reliable information systems that allow for cross-cutting management, quality assurance and evaluation of early childhood policies and programs.
- Develop and agree on common outcome and performance indicators and measures across early childhood service systems.
  - Enter into cooperative agreements among state agencies to share data and track children from birth through school entry.
  - Enhance the capacity of state and community to use data for planning, administration, and quality enhancement.
  - Expand health surveillance systems to inform systems planning efforts.
- Obj 5.4 Implement a cross-cutting financing plan that maximizes and integrates the use of the myriad federal, state, municipal, and private resources.
- Develop policies that allow funding to “follow the child” and bridge the gaps in eligibility inherent in the current categorical funding system.
  - Develop an early childhood budget annually that requires legislative approval and monitoring to ensure allocated funding is used as budgeted.
  - Create funding streams to pilot best practices and provide incentives for public-private funding partnerships.
  - Provide incentives for public-private funding partnerships that increase resources for research, evaluation and implementation of best practices.

**Goal 6. Promote public education and develop public will through a broad communication and engagement strategy.**

- Obj 6.1 Coordinate existing public awareness and strategic communication campaigns regarding the importance of early childhood health and school readiness into a cohesive effort to gain public support for a quality early childhood system.
- Obj 6.2 Facilitate ready access to information on early childhood research, advice, and issues through the web, all providers, and community institutions.
- Obj 6.3 Engage parents in all state and local/regional processes and activities aimed at improving the early childhood services and systems.

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<sup>ii</sup> This plan was developed with funding and technical assistance from the State Early Childhood Comprehensive Systems Initiative (SECCS), launched by the Maternal and Child Health Bureau (MCHB) of the U.S. Department of Human Services in 2002. The federal Maternal and Child Health Bureau awarded grants to all states to design plans to build a family-centered early childhood service system integrated across agencies and programs.

<sup>iii</sup> For each goal, the Plan identifies key objectives, performance measures and partners in implementation.

<sup>iv</sup> Current public-private efforts include the Graustein Memorial Funds’ 50-community Discovery Initiative, the Hartford Foundation for Public Giving’s Brighter Futures Initiative, the Community Foundation for Greater New Haven’s First Years First initiative, the United Ways’ Success by Six efforts, and the Promoting Early Health and Learning initiative, funded by a collaborative comprised of the Graustein Memorial Fund, the Children’s Fund of Connecticut, the Connecticut Health Foundation, and the Community Foundation for Greater New Haven.